

# Options Paper for State Conservation Leaders

## Conservation District Technical Employee

### Technical Credentialing and Training Needs

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As you are aware, a team of NRCS, Commission and District folks have been working on the issue of Technical Credentialing and Training. We are at a crossroads and need your direction as to which path to go down. We ask through this options paper for your guidance regarding what option or options we should continue to work. The Team has been operating on shared appreciation for the need for credentialing and training to maintain an effective, accountable, professional workforce. While this seems to be shared by the leadership, the mechanisms as to how this is to be achieved and the appropriate roles of the conservation partners are unclear to us. There are too many possibilities for us to explore. We are hoping that you will narrow things down not only to make our work easier but to ensure we deliver the best possible solution.

**Overall Goal:** The overall effort is aimed at continuing our statewide development of a qualified, trained, capable, and effective conservation district workforce.

**Guiding Principles:** The following are offered as guiding principles based on identified needs for a system to meet District Technical Employee Credentialing and Training Needs.

- Districts need competent folks to provide technical assistance in order to avoid liability and deliver solutions and tools for land managers.
- WACD needs to have confidence in the technical capabilities of districts throughout the state as they propose/respond to legislative initiatives where districts are identified as applying NRCS standards/planning process as solutions to resource concerns.
- Commission needs confidence that taxpayer money is being well spent (practices being installed meet certain, e.g. NRCS standards and specifications).
- Employees need some sort of credentialing to recognize their knowledge, training, experience (competency).
- NRCS DCs could not certify employees as to subject matter competency but were in position to provide district managers/supervisors with feedback on how competently employees performed in specific instances.
- WADE training should be utilized to advance employee competency.
- Funding coming through the Commission should include a spot check system for installed practices to ensure that they are put in to NRCS spec.
- Other agencies Federal, State & local need to know that competent employees are developing and/or implementing practices to NRCS standards if those standards are being preferred as Best Available Science.
- District Boards & managers have varying degrees of competency which makes it very difficult to assess employee ability to do the work in many instances.
- Commission policy as to ensuring practices installed as to NRCS spec will not change.
- State Leaders are looking forward to the survey results with a note that participation (responses) will perhaps be as telling as content.

#### Options for State Leader's Consideration:

1. Take no further action
2. Complete the training/experience inventory – work on training opportunities identified
3. Complete #2 and include the development of a method for “district credentialing” of employees meeting the NRCS criteria for a practice – ask WSCC to be a repository of records submitted by the districts
4. Complete #2 & #3 and include a request to WSCC to take the lead role in certifying district employees, determining accuracy of the documentation, quality.
5. Complete #2 & #3 & #4 plus add a requirement by WSCC that a District (individually or by MOU with sister cluster district) demonstrate proficiency in a specified suite of skills deemed fundamental to deliver a program for which it had received State funding. Examples include CREP, Livestock & Irrigation Efficiencies.

### Additional Information on Options:

**1. Take no further action**

No additional information needed

**2. Complete the training/experience inventory – work on training opportunities identified**

This option would be to work with the WACD to finish work on the training/experience inventory for Conservation District technical employees, then utilize the inventory to work with NRCS and partner organizations to develop and/or make available training opportunities only.

**3. Complete #2 and include the development of a method for “district credentialing” of employees meeting the NRCS criteria for a practice – ask WSCC to be a repository of records submitted by the districts**

This option would include the completion of the training/experience inventory, make available and/or organize training opportunities related to needs, and would also include the development and coordination of a “district credentialing” system utilizing the existing NRCS criteria for planning and implementing conservation practices. WSCC would be asked to provide staff support to receive and record these “district credentialing” submittals.

Associated issues with this option would be the WSCC role and workload, confidentiality of the records, utilization of the NRCS TSP self certification, use of third party associations that have agreement with NRCS.

**4. Complete #2 & #3 and include a request to WSCC to take the lead role in “credentialing district employees, determining accuracy of the documentation, quality.**

This option would include the items listed in options #2 and #3 with a request for WSCC staff time to run a credentialing system including determining accuracy of the documentation, quality of information submitted. This also could include unique program elements that could differ from the NRCS protocol.

Associated issues with this option would be those listed in option #3; plus whether or not the WSCC should identify “minimum” skills or competency levels for employees who are funded by Commission grants (e.g. CREP, Irrigation Efficiency, Livestock), input from some district employees that the NRCS system was very complex and difficult to implement and so, is likely to be something beyond the ability of Districts/Commission to utilize as is, and the need for a credentialing system that is less exacting /exhaustive.

**5. Complete #2 & #3 & #4 plus add a requirement by WSCC that a District (individually or by MOU with sister cluster district) demonstrate proficiency in a specified suite of skills deemed fundamental to deliver a program for which it had received State funding. Examples include CREP, Livestock & Irrigation Efficiencies.**

This option includes all but #1 listed above plus a WSCC **requirement** that a district (individually or with another district) demonstrate proficiency in a specified suite of skills deemed fundamental to deliver a program for which it had received State funding.

Associated issues with this option would be those listed in option #4 plus the WSCC workload and staff needs to create/manage system and required utilization, and the issue of cluster “mentors” who can observe employees performance, provide feedback as to competency or ensure adequacy of work product by providing final check-off.

**Work Team Members:** Rich Baden, Joe Holtrop, George Boggs, Harold Crose, Frank Easter, Ray Ledgerwood

Certification of Conservation District Technical Employees  
 Summary of States with Certification Systems  
 Monday, February 27, 2006



| State               | Certification - Practices   | Training   | Contact      |
|---------------------|---|--|--------------|
| <b>Michigan</b>     | <p>Two processes of Certification</p> <p>1. Have a certification system for Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan providers – a multi-agency effort with Extension, NRCS, MI Dept. of Ag. Criteria has to be met by plan providers for certification. CNMP providers attend a CNMP school 3-3 day sessions, then do a CNMP that is reviewed by the CNMP Committee (multi-agency) – once accepted the individual is put on a list of certified providers. At present most providers are not district employees (only 7 CD employees)</p> <p>2. District Technical Employees – for conservation planners they are using the NRCS Certification System, coordination of training with NRCS. At present 10 district technical employees have NRCS sign-off capability for doing project planning, implementation and planning. Liability coverage for districts is organized through the state association and CNMP providers (non-CD) provide their own. Web site is <a href="http://www.maeat.org">www.maeat.org</a> for additional information on both CNMP and livestock programs.</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. CNMP providers attend a CNMP school 3-3 day sessions</li> <li>2. They are utilizing retired NRCS individuals as trainers with the MI Dept. of Ag coordinating the logistics and arrangements – coordinating entire effort with NRCS</li> </ol>   | Gordon Wenk  |
| <b>Pennsylvania</b> | Utilizing the NRCS certification system after the district employees attend "boot camp 1 & 2". Have had the boot camp in place for conservation district technical employees for about 6 years. PACD, Commission and NRCS partner to put on. Commission provides \$40,000 toward expenses. The spring 2-week Boot Camp 1 includes conservation planning and engineering in one week increments with a break in between. The summer Boot Camp 2 includes both an agronomy and engineering tracks – held in summer for plants, crops, cover training.   | <p>See detail to the left on technical boot camp</p> <p>PA has a CD for training and orientation of District Directors. Johann Nardone has developed the 1 hour 20 minute CD that covers information from their Director Handbook. Nardone finishing in the next few weeks and will forward a copy. No certification of Directors.</p> | Karl Brown   |
| <b>Louisiana</b>    | Louisiana relies on the NRCS to provide the training for both our district soil conservation and our engineering technicians.   | The NRCS also assists us with some of the district office staff training.  | Brad Spicer  |
| <b>Arkansas</b>     | <p>The Arkansas Natural Resources Commission has a certification program for nutrient management planning and application.</p> <p>The tracking is done by entering all certified persons in the data base. The information is stored in an excel data base for now, until we get a</p>  | Worked with the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service to develop a training manual and curriculum for nutrient management planners and applicators.   | Adrian Baber |

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|                 | <p>better program to put it in. This is our first round of certification and seems to be working very well, tracking the continuing education will be difficult, that is why we are looking at several different data bases for information storage. Currently I have one staff member that handles the program, this seems to be sufficient.</p>   | <p>The CES works with our agency in setting training sessions, CES does the training, our staff collects the fees for certification at the meetings and administers the test following the training.</p> |                                     |
| <b>Texas</b>    | <p>Have several district employees, along with some of our staff that have gotten certified in crops as a certified crop advisor through the American Society of Agronomy. Others take NRCS on-line courses in specific areas for the TSP registry.</p> <p>The water conservation certification project we are currently working on with the Texas Water Resources Institute and the Texas Cooperative Extension is in the very early stages of development. Do not have any specific details at this time however, if this is something you are interested in please stay in touch.</p>  | <p>We just received a state grant from another state agency to develop a water conservation certification training program in cooperation with Extension</p>   | <p>Mel Davis<br/>&amp;TJ Helton</p> |
| <b>Virginia</b> | <p>The system in Virginia is not yet closely monitored and tracked. Virginia NRCS provides considerable assistance with tracking competencies of SWCD staff with regards to conservation planning.</p> <p>Department of Conservation and Recreation spends considerable effort supporting SWCDs as the delivery system for Virginia's Agricultural BMP Cost-Share Program. This program provides a cost-sharing, and financial incentive arrangement for roughly 30 best management practices. DCR prescribes the practice standards and specifications (which are generally consistent with NRCS) and the administrative requirements for SWCDs to carry out the program locally. Monies we pass through to SWCDs for local BMPs total \$10 million this year, and no less than this amount for the next program year (starting this July 1).</p> <p>DCR establishes an agreement with each SWCD to document how much money they will receive and to establish their fulfillment of a Scope of Services (boilerplate document attached). Within the laundry list of that Scope of Services is an expectation which partly gets at the essence of your inquiry. This item: "Ensure staff implementing the Virginia Agricultural BMP Cost-Share Program, and other agricultural related programs, seek and maintain needed conservation planning certification and job approval authority for appropriate BMPs within the service area of the district." This expectation exists in the agreement for the Cost-Share Program and also in a separate agreement between DCR and each SWCD for grants that support the operating costs of each district. Just over \$4 million is passed thru from DCR to the 47 SWCDs each year to support the business costs of running a SWCD.</p> |  | <p>Mark Meador</p>                  |

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|  | <p>We assess fulfillment of district performance with these agreements, but as of yet haven't established a tracking system to monitor individual SWCD staff. I don't know what the situation may be in Washington, but in this state the turnover of SWCD employees is significant. This further complicates maintaining a well trained work force and monitoring the advancement of employee skills.</p> <p>Hope this information is of some value to you. Please let me know if I can help you further in any way. Best wishes to you.</p> <p>&gt;&gt;&gt; "Carter, Ken - Richmond, VA" &lt;Ken.Carter@va.usda.gov&gt;<br/>02/09/06 1:53<br/>&gt;&gt;&gt; PM &gt;&gt;&gt;<br/>Mark,</p> <p>We are tracking all of the training and certification for conservation planning certification (Levels I, II and III). We had been doing RUSLE certification, and will be going back to something like that for RUSLE 2. John is working on a non -engineering practice certification, but I don't know how far along he is on it or what priority he has put on it.</p> <p>The engineers do maintain a database by employee for all of the engineering practices and the levels of EJA.</p> |  |  |
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#### States without Certification Systems

| State               | Certification - Practices   | Training | Notes           |
|---------------------|---|----------|-----------------|
| <b>California</b>   | We don't have anything. We'd be glad if most districts had staff, period.   |          | Dennis O'Bryant |
| <b>Kentucky</b>     | In Kentucky we do not have a certification program for district employees, but would be very interested in the information you develop for Washington State or receive from other states that have established certification programs. We have 26 positions funded through special federal funds (80% federal funded and 20% state or local funded) that are hired to assist NRCS with Farm Bill workload and each employee must meet a specific education & job experience requirement, but they are not as of yet certified planners. |          | Steve Coleman   |
| <b>South Dakota</b> | South Dakota does not have a certification process in place at this time, but would be very interested in what you develop.   |          | Pete Jahraus    |

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